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ALBERTA'S PIONEER WHEAT
GROWERS



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Seward D. Nesbitt

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DEDICATION

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This pamphlet is dedicated to the pioneer grain growers of the province of Alberta. It has been prepared for the express purpose of recording information about these pioneer farmers before much of the available material is lost.

Any student or writer who cares to make use of the information contained herein is free to do so.

Leonard D. Nesbitt,
Sup't. of Publicity,
Alberta Wheat Pool,
March, 1944.

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THE RANGELAND ERA

The first white man who reached the province of Alberta saw a region inhabited by Indians who lived mainly by hunting. Great herds of buffalo pastured on the southern prairies while in the parklands and wooded regions of the more northerly areas deer, moose and smaller animals were found in abundance. The lucrative fur trade attracted the white men and the Hudson's Bay Company and the North West Fur Company established trading posts where the Indians could come to exchange their furs and hides for trinkets and commodities. At these posts the employees of the companies planted gardens to supply themselves with fresh vegetables. Surprisingly large yields of vegetables of excellent quality encouraged the traders to extend their efforts. They were the first gardeners in Alberta.

The disappearance of the buffalo in the early 70's created a serious food situation for the Indians. The Canadian government imported cattle in order to fulfill the terms of the treaty which provided that the natives should be supplied with meat. The cattle thrived on the nutritious prairie grass and this encouraged ranchers to go into the business on the broad plains which once supported millions of head of buffalo. The first "round up" was held at Macleod in 1881 and by the spring of 1883 there were 75,000 head of cattle in the province. The golden era of the range men lasted til 1890 when the influx of homesteaders commenced. The government cancelled in 1896 leases allowing ranchers to purchase 10 per cent of the total at \$1.25 an acre.

The railroad reached Calgary in the fall of 1883. It was completed to the Pacific coast in 1885. A branch line was built into Edmonton in 1891 and to Macleod in 1892. Lethbridge was connected with the main line in 1892 by a narrow gauge track. In 1905 the Canadian Northern railway reached Edmonton.

Small patches of grain were grown in various places in the province in the pioneer years. Peter Pond, a fur trader from the United States, raised potatoes and other vegetables at Pond's Fort, 30 miles up the Athabasca River from Lake Athabasca, in 1779. He may have grown a little grain. Certainly he was the first man in Alberta to grow a garden. Harmon, an employee of the North West Fur Company, grew a little barley at Fort Dunvegan on the Peace River in 1809. An extract from his diary of July 21st, 1809, relates: "We have cut our barley and it is the finest I have ever seen."

Between 1857 and 1860 Captain John Palliser, an Irishman in the service of the British government, was given charge of an expedition to explore the Canadian prairies and Rockies. He relates that vegetables were grown near old Bow Fort which is located about 60 miles west of Calgary.

WILLIAM CUST

It is generally accepted that William Cust, who farmed at St. Albert, northeast of Edmonton, was the first commercial grain grower in Alberta. He was a native of Derry County, Ireland, and went to California in the gold rush of 1849. Latterly he went into fur trading and established a post on the Peace River which he later sold to the Hudson's Bay Company. With the money he received he bought land at St. Albert. He was the first man to import a self-binder into Alberta. The bundles were tied by wire instead of binder twine, as used nowadays.

A correspondent of the Toronto Mail gave the following description of this pioneer farmer in 1881:

"Whilst referring to the surrounding district, (Edmonton), I may mention the most extensive farmer is Mr. Cust, whose farm is contiguous to the St. Albert mission. He has been on his present farm for five years. He had this year 180 acres of wheat, yielding 30 bushels to the acre, 36 acres of barley, yielding 36 bushels to the acre and 12 acres of oats, yielding 25 bushels to the acre. The grain crop this past season has been lighter than in former years owing to the cold, wet weather, altogether exceptional until the past two seasons."

The late A.C. Fraser, secretary of the National Dairy Council of Canada, Ottawa, was formerly manager of the Edmonton branch of the Merchants Bank of Canada and in that capacity became acquainted with William Cust. Mr. Fraser told the author that Cust was a delightful character and as honest as the sun.

"My impression is that his (Cust's) first venture was the 'Cut Bank Lake' farm now owned by the Croziers," wrote Mr. Fraser. "Bill was a customer of the bank when I was manager. His credit was of the highest. About 1910 he had a loan of around \$1,000 unsecured. He also had owing to him under a mortgage a much larger sum. He called on me one morning and said, 'Fraser, I am going to die soon. I have read my Bible through twice this winter and I am ready as soon as I pay off my debts, and that I will do as soon as I can sell that mortgage. The sale is arranged as soon as I bring in the title and I will be back tomorrow with it.' Bill drove home to his farm at St. Albert, sat down to his evening meal, and died."

STEELE AND INGLIS

Two other pioneer wheat growers were Dick Steele and Billy Inglis who produced a wheat crop in the Beaver Lake district, 18 miles west of Vegreville, in 1882, and hence are entitled to share in the honor of being listed among Alberta's first genuine wheat farmers.

A.L. Horton, publisher of the Vegreville Observer, presents a well-authenticated case on behalf of Steele and Inglis. He writes:

"May I quote from an article appearing in the Observer in March, 1909, relative to early farming in the Beaver Lake district just 18 miles west of Vegreville. The article is written by the late Henry Deby, himself an early settler in that district and conversant with everything which took place. Mr. Deby said 'it was in the year 1881 that the thin edge of the wedge, or of the plow, was inserted (at Beaver Lake) when two white men, whose names posterity will retain as Dick Steele and Billy Inglis, pitched their tent and turned the first furrow on the east shore of the lake. They cut their first crop in 1882 of wheat, oats and barley. The wheat was Club and some of it was put in as late as May 24th. The rainfall was abundant, the season favorable, most of the grain was cut in August and furnished an excellent yield and sample. I might add that the Dick Steele mentioned was a brother of the late Sir Sam Steele."

PEACE RIVER PIONEERS

It should not be overlooked that in 1875 Professor John Macoun, of the federal department of agriculture, saw fine wheat which had been grown by the Oblate fathers at Fort Chipewyan. He took a sample with him and showed it at the Centennial Exhibition at Philadelphia where it won first prize for red spring wheat. The bushelage was small, however, and not on a commercial scale.

Another early wheat producer was Reverend J. Gough Brick, Anglican missionary at Dunvegan, who arrived there in 1882. The Edmonton Bulletin of June 15th, 1942, under the heading, "Fifty Years Ago," published an article from the files of that paper of 1892 which dealt with the activities of Rev. Mr. Brick. It said:-

"In 1885 he commenced cultivation of a farm at Old Wives Lake on the rear of Fort Dunvegan, where raising crops has been a success for the past 40 years." This direct quotation from the pioneer Edmonton paper would place agriculture on the Dunvegan flat back to 1852. What sort of crops did they grow?

According to the well-informed N.H. Soars, librarian at Peace River town, the first white man at Dunvegan was Alexandra McKenzie, on May 11, 1793, two days out from the Forks (above Peace River) in search of the Western Ocean. In March, 1804, David Thompson, surveyor for the Nor'-West Company, camped there on his return from Rocky Mountain House and marked the spot for a post, and building was commenced in the winter of 1805-06.

"The Rev. J. Gough Brick, after five years at Dunvegan, moved his mission settlement to Shaftsbury, 15 miles above Peace River town. He raised \$5,000 in Eastern Canada to buy a complete farming outfit, including a thresher, in 1888. In 1893 with wheat grown there he won the world's championship at the Chicago fair--a feat duplicated by Herman Trelle, Peace River farmer, some 35 years later."

SOUTH'S 'FIRST FARMER'

Southern Alberta's first wheat grower was Joseph McFarland, whose farm was located on the Old Man River a few miles east of Macleod. The Macleod Gazette in its issue of December 14th, 1882, said "Joseph McFarland has finished his threshing. He has 2,000 bushels of grain, 250 of which are wheat. The number of acres sown was about 80. He is hauling the grain to town with an eight-horse team and two wagons."

Harry Maunsell, Alberta's oldest rancher, now living in Calgary, stated he knew Joe McFarland very well and recalled the wheat grown on the McFarland farm in 1882. At that time, Mr. Maunsell was located with his brothers Ed. and George on a farm west of Macleod on the Old Man River. Joe McFarland had come out from the north of Ireland, taken up land east of Macleod and had brought in 25 or 30 head of milk cows from Montana to supply milk to the Northwest Mounted Police located at Fort Macleod. The police also needed oats for their horses and paid \$1.70 a bushel for the same, so McFarland broke up some land and started growing oats. Then a promoter came down from Calgary and promised to build a grist mill if wheat were grown in the district. So McFarland put in a wheat crop and thus gained the honor of being the first wheat farmer in Southern Alberta. However, the grist mill was never built and the wheat was sold for chicken feed.

Afterwards the Maunsells broke up land and put in 150 acres of wheat, and other ranchers dabbled in wheat growing. Harry Maunsell is now in his 86th year. He came to the Macleod district in 1881 from Limerick, Ireland. His two brothers have since passed away.

PINCHER CREEK PIONEERS

The first wheat grown in the Pincher Creek district, one of Alberta's pioneer areas, was seeded by Francis Willock who settled in that locality in 1882. In 1883 he planted wheat from one head of Dawson's Golden Chaff. The mice ate the most of it. In 1884 he planted what was left in a flour barrel to keep it away from the mice. All the grain harvested therefrom was planted in a garden spot in 1885. In 1886 he had about an acre of wheat. A son of this pioneer farmer, D. Fred Willock, is still living at Pincher Creek.

A.M. Morden, of Pincher Creek, obtained some of the Willock wheat and started to grow the grain on a commercial scale. In 1893 he sent an exhibit to the world's fair at Chicago and received there for the Award of Merit. A copy of a certificate issued to Mr. Morden by the Chicago World Fair, 1893, is framed and hanging in the municipal office at Pincher Creek at the present time. While not historically correct, as obviously Mr. Willock grew wheat previously the certificate bears this inscription:-

"The first wheat on record in the Pincher Creek district was grown by A.M. Morden, of Pincher Creek, and received the Award of Merit at the Chicago World Fair, 1893. The wheat was seeded April 25th and harvested August 20th, yield 53½ bushels, weight 65½ pounds to the bushel. He also received the Award of Merit for oats and barley at that time. Oats were sown April 29th, harvested August 12th, yield 85 bushels to the acre, weight 49½ pounds per bushel; barley sown May 5th, harvested August 10th, yield 40 bushels per acre, weight 54 pounds per bushel."

Dr. George Duche, an old timer of Cardston district, shipped the first carload of wheat from that point in 1899. In those days there were no farms between Lethbridge and Cardston and Macleod and Cardston. There were just long, lonesome prairie trails, miles and miles of bald prairie with little shacks or dug-outs here and there.

Dr. Duche made a deal with an agent of a milling company in Calgary and obtained 72¢ a bushel for his wheat, sacked and delivered at Macleod. Some 1,400 bushels of wheat were sacked on the Duche farm, loaded on 14 wagons, each pulled with four-horse teams and hauled to Macleod. It took two days to drive that distance.

ALBERTA WORLD "WHEAT KINGS"

Alberta can logically claim to produce the world's best wheat. On 15 occasions an exhibit of Alberta wheat has won an international championship. Since 1911 exhibits of Alberta wheat at the International Grain and Hay show, Chicago, won world championships 14 times. The wheat competition at that great exhibition was discontinued in 1941. Between 1929 and 1941--a period of 13 years--exhibits of Alberta wheat won world championships in 11 years.

The record of Alberta winnings since 1911 is as follows:

- 1912--Henry Holmes, Alberta.
- 1923--H.G.L. Strange, Penn, Alberta.
- 1926--Herman Trelle, Wembley, Alberta.
- 1929--J.H.B. Smith, Wolf Creek, Alberta.

1930--Herman Trelle, Wembley, Alberta.
 1931--Herman Trelle, Wembley, Alberta.
 1932--Herman Trelle, Wembley, Alberta.
 1934--John B. Allsop, Wembley, Alberta.
 1935--W. Frelan Wilfred, Stavely, Alberta.
 1936--Herman Trelle, Wembley, Alberta.
 1938--F. Lloyd Rigby, Wembley, Alberta.
 1939--F. Lloyd Rigby, Wembley, Alberta.
 1940--F. Lloyd Rigby, Wembley, Alberta.
 1941--William Miller, Edmonton, Alberta.

P.S.:-- In 1875 an exhibit of wheat grown by the Oblate fathers at Fort Chipewyan won first prize for red spring wheat at the Centennial exhibit at Philadelphia. In 1893 wheat grown by Reverend J. Gough Brick in the Peace River district won the world's championship at the Chicago fair.

RECORD OF PRODUCTION

In the year 1905 the province of Alberta was formed and came into the federation of provinces known as the Dominion of Canada. Prior to that date the territory now included in the provinces of Saskatchewan and Alberta and outlying lands was designated as the North West Territory. In 1906 only 660,000 acres of land in Alberta were under crop. Of that total, 177,100 acres were under wheat, the average yield for that year being 22.4 bushels and the average farm price 65¢. Acreage under oats totalled 335,700, average yield 39.1 bushels and the average farm price 25¢ a bushel. Barley acreage totalled 73,600, average yield 29.3 bushels and the average farm price 33¢. In 1942 the acreage under cultivation in this province totalled 19,709,800, of which 12,068,300 acres were under grain, 60,500 were planted to root crops, 1,497,000 in fodder crops, 5,875,000 in summerfallow and 209,000 in new breaking.

The first great impetus to grain production came from World War I. In 1914, the year that war broke out, there were only 2,805,900 acres under cultivation, of which 2,586,400 were under grain. In 1918, the year peace was declared, cultivated acreage had risen to 8,578,000 and acreage under grain to 6,358,600.

The following table shows the increase in wheat acreage:-

	<u>Wheat Acreage</u>
1906	177,100
1914	1,371,100
1918	3,892,489
1926	6,161,383
1932	8,201,000
1939 (the peak)	8,379,000
1943	4,829,000

The long-time average of grain production on a per-acre basis and also farm price is as follows:-

	<u>1906-42</u>	<u>Average Farm Price</u>
Wheat	17.3	76¢
Oats	33.4	32¢
Barley	25.2	38¢
Rye	13.0	58¢
Flax	8.8	\$1.51

FACTS ABOUT ALBERTA

(Data from Dominion Government Census, 1941)

Area of Province: 255,285 square miles

Area in farms, acres	43,243,589
Improved farm lands	19,459,615
Unimproved farm lands	23,783,973
Value of farm property, total	\$ 702,491,500
Land	\$ 373,470,500
Buildings	118,421,300
Machinery and Implements	117,248,900
Livestock	100,350,800
Population, total	796,169
Rural	489,583
Urban	306,586
Number of Farms	99,716
Tenure of Farm Lands -	
Operated by owner	62,576
Operated by tenant	16,875
Operated by part owner and part tenant	19,694
Operated by manager	571

The material contained in this pamphlet is gathered from a variety of sources. The author desires to give credit to the following:-

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by the late E.A. Howes, Dean of
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Provincial Department of Agriculture.
Report of the Palliser Expedition.
The Edmonton Bulletin.
The Edmonton Journal.
The Vegreville Observer.
The Fairview Post.
A.L. Horton, of Vegreville, Alberta.
D. Fred Willock, of Pincher Creek, Alta.
Harry Maunsell, of Calgary, Alberta.
(formerly of Macleod.)